

ABC NIGHTLINE
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VOICE OF UNIDENTIFIED MALE (ABC News): Did the Central Intelligence Agency try to have Ronald Rewald killed to keep him from talking?

GREENFIELD: This ABC News report last September added a new dimension to the debate. The Central Intelligence Agency, angered over a report alleging a possible agency threat on the life of a rogue employee, filed a Fairness Doctrine complaint before the Federal Communications Commission. The agency argued, in effect, that it had been libeled. ABC later backed off from its allegation, citing doubts about its source, Scott Barnes.

PETER JENNINGS (ABC News): So ABC news has now concluded that Barnes's charges cannot be substantiated, and we have no reason to doubt the CIA's denial.

GEORGE CLARKE (CIA associate counsel): The issue in this case is not whether or

how much CIA has been damaged, although we certainly don't like what was said about us. The issue in this case is the public's right to be fairly and adequately informed under the First Amendment.

GREENFIELD: So essentially, what, what you're looking for then is not to put ABC News outta business but... CLARKE: To give it a slap on the wrist.

GREENFIELD: ABC News executive David Burke. DAVID BURKE (ABC News vice president): I find something disquieting in a government agency, especially an agency like the Central Intelligence Agency, appealing to another government agency, which is a regulatory agency and has control over our very economic life, on the question of our news judgment.

GREENFIELD: Today, the FCC dismissed the agency's complaint, finding no evidence that ABC had knowingly distorted the story. ~~While big news~~ organizations get all the publicity, libel suits are felt with particular force at small news organizations like the Main Line Chronicle in suburban Philadelphia. Its entire editorial focus has been changed by its owner because of libel suits. A few years ago, the Chronicle was a feisty, muckraking weekly.

Now, after losing six-figure libel verdict, the Chronicle has become a showbiz-oriented, noncontroversial paper. IRV LIBERMAN (publisher, Main Line Chronicle): I will always feel this way, probably, that I have, that I have abandoned part of being, part of the privilege of being in the newspaper business in a free country like the United States of America.

GREENFIELD: Liberman says his insurance carrier almost dropped the Chronicle from libel protection. And the weekly Philadelphia paper, Welcomat, facing several big libel suits, found its insurance suddenly canceled and had to scramble for cover. DAN ROTTENBERG (editor, Welcomat): And had we not been able to replace that coverage, we'd just have to give up the format we have now and go back to being a very con, conventional, pedestrian weekly newspaper, I guess publishing press releases and things like that.

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GREENFIELD: Bruce Fein, who was a lawyer with the Federal Communications Commission, says this misses the point. BRUCE FEIN (former FCC lawyer):

What's at issue is the right of the press basically to lie. That is, should the press be guaranteed legal immunity knowingly and intentionally to lie? GENE ROBERTS (The Philadelphia Inquirer): It...(unintelligible)...the American system, and we are tampering in the last three or four years that has endured and kept this country great for 180 years. And we are gonna regret it, ah, ah, very, very seriously, in my opinion.

GREENFIELD: A free press is supposed to protect the public, its right to facts and to wide-open debate about its country. Are these libel suits a threat to that right or a necessary check on a press that has run roughshod over the rights of public citizens? This is Jeff Greenfield for Nightline in New York.

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